

## History in the Making: The Perspective of the Participants by Marta Harnecker

*Transcribed and edited by Diego Filmus*

*On February 25, 2003, Marta Harnecker gave a presentation with the title of this bulletin. The event was co-sponsored by CERLAC and the Departments of Political Science and History at York. The following is a transcription, edited for brevity, of that presentation.*

I will begin with a brief history of how I began to do my work. My work is similar to journalism though my formal training is not in that field. In a 1995 book, I describe how I began conducting interviews. The book begins by describing my background: I was Catholic and a psychologist. I went to Paris intending to study social psychology, but upon arriving in France I realized I had already studied the materials being offered in Chile under different names.

So I decided instead to study philosophy and Marxism. I was interested in the concept of Marxist determinism, having completed my master's thesis on *El acto libre* (free will). I was fascinated by Althusser's approach to Marxism, which permitted me, a Catholic activist, to understand the dynamics of society and the dynamics that produced poverty in particular. When I discovered that there was a system that produces poverty, I became engrossed with Marxist thought.

This discovery led me to abandon psychology. Later, when university reforms in Chile introduced Marxism as an academic topic, I became a professor of that subject – something I would never have thought possible.

Without completing my doctoral degree, I began teaching historical materialism to a group of Latin Americans in Paris. This class led to my first book: *Los conceptos elementales del materialismo histórico* [The Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism]. This book became obligatory reading across Latin America and Spain in

the seventies and eighties – even guerrilla fighters and political prisoners read it. Thus, the book has an emotional relationship with the youth in many Spanish-speaking countries. Similar books were created for the workers and those without formal education. Thus, popular education became very important in this era.

I began my career in journalism when the Allende government [in Chile, 1970-73] asked me to be the director of a weekly journal. I didn't know anything about journalism at the time. But because they sought someone who symbolized the unity of the Left, I felt obliged. I was responsible for two or three pages every week, dedicated to interviews.

I became fascinated with journalism, particularly at that moment of transformation in Chile. We combined interviews with government officials with interviews with workers at the grassroots level to allow the government to understand how the people were viewing, and living, the process of change taking place at the time.

Knowing it was imminent, we denounced the *coup d'état* three weeks before it occurred. In the last issue of the journal, which was never released, we interviewed a soldier. The soldier admitted that if called upon by Allende, the soldiers would rebel against the plotting generals. Of course, we know that Allende never called upon the soldiers to rebel because, before the coup, soldiers who were pro-Allende were expelled from the army.

I was one of the journalists on the list of those to be presented to the Pinochet government. We knew perfectly what this meant. So I went into hiding, hoping to prepare a clandestine edition of the journal. We thought the coup would be much less severe than the one that had taken place in Brazil [in 1964], but the regime

proved more brutal and enduring than we expected, so I had to leave Chile for Cuba where I have lived for the past 29 years.

Upon arrival in Cuba, I was very enthusiastic about the Cuban process. While I thought that the outside world was well informed about that nation's accomplishments in education and health, I asked myself: is this a democratic process? So I decided to study participatory processes in Cuba from the beginnings of the Revolution. For example, I looked into who it was that decided the fate of Batista's followers and was astonished to find that the national bourgeois journal defended the executions. Out of this work, I published the book *Cuba: Dictatorship or Democracy?* (1979).

In 1979, the Sandinista Revolution made a significant effort to make create a more pluralist, open, and democratic state in Nicaragua. In an interview with the eldest brother of then-president Daniel Ortega, I returned to the style of journalism I had begun in Chile. I then conducted interviews in Guatemala and El Salvador during the time of guerrilla uprisings in those countries.

Eight years later, when Latin American leaders met in Cuba, old friends from the region asked me to resume my interviewing because, they felt, we did not then have many Leftist leaders writing anymore and, as a result, we were losing touch with our past and with each other. Some suggested that I lead a team of Latin Americans in this endeavour. I knew that I could only do this with people who are well-versed in the themes in which I work and who are militant or easily trusted, because I am constantly researching provocative and controversial topics.

Thus, when asked to take part in this team, I suggested we conduct thorough

and lengthy interviews to fully understand the history of the different movements we would profile. Studying history through documents, one has a completely different idea of reality. I wanted to interview the leaders of movements, those who were shaping politics, to ask them what they had learned from their struggles.

I began with Colombia. Out of this work, I wrote three books: one on the *Ejército de liberación nacional* [National Liberation Army, ELN], another on the *Ejército guerrillero de los pobres* [Guerrilla Army of the Poor], and another on the general secretary of the Communist Party.

I chose Colombia because it was where the most interesting process of unification of the Left was then taking place. The five guerrilla groups had formed a unit and civil society movements were converging. My objective was to study the process in a manner that could provide lessons from which we could all learn.

My findings were interesting: the leaders of the movements were working together, but at the same time they did not know each other's histories. From that moment on, before publishing, I began to circulate my work to other groups struggling for change in order to provide some insights and lessons from the past to help those trying to shape the future.

My method has always begun with questions regarding the doubts of people on the Left. I wanted to help people to learn from the experiences of others – to learn from mistakes as well as successes. This is very different from the usual sociological approach. My approach seeks out exemplary experiences and to share these with other militant protagonists, whereas sociologists typically employ a static and 'objective' perspective.

After these guerrilla interviews, I wrote books on Colombia and El Salvador. One of my interviewees in Colombia recommended that I interview on two interesting phenomena: the *Frente amplio de Uruguay* (Broad Front of Uruguay) and the PT (Workers' Party) in Brazil. I also wanted to study *La izquierda unida* (the United Left) in Peru. However, in Peru we were disappointed because the groups on the Left spoke more against the other Leftist groups than they did on any alternative national project. Ultimately, the United Left disappeared as a consequence of this

divisiveness, and now they are slowly reconstructing.

In Uruguay, we began to study the Broad Front. Initiated in 1971, this is now the longest-standing leftist coalition of its kind in Latin America. At the time of our study, various member groups participated in a roundtable to reconstruct their histories. Their visions and critiques were profound and well articulated. Unlike the situation in most other such organizations, the *Frente amplio* enjoys a pluralist culture that encourages debate. There are political instruments in their organization for deciding what topics they must approve by consensus, while for less important issues they permit a certain divergence.

I am convinced that without an instrument that allows for unity in action, you cannot do anything; the Right has a unified articulation when needed. For this reason, the *frente's* candidate became the mayor of Montevideo in 1989. When studying the *frente amplio*, I also became aware of the importance of local government.

The PT has the originality of being the only party in Latin America formed by unions. By studying the history of the PT, I discovered how five or six local governments were critical to the success of the party. During the crisis of socialism, when the Left was rethinking many things, local-level politics gave us a sample of what we imagined a social democratic society could look like.

At a comparative level, I looked at five different experiences in Brazil, one in Uruguay, and two in Venezuela. I also began to expose these experiences to a larger public through audio-visual media, since we are living in the era of television. For example, in Brazil, we made a video on participatory budget making, demonstrating how people can become more involved in government.

Currently, I am studying Venezuela. I have conducted a long interview with President Chávez. As in my other interviews, I began by asking about his doubts regarding the Left. We are going to make a video on the process of change in Venezuela under Chávez because the world media is misrepresenting it.

In Latin America, historical memory is captured at various levels. The first level is represented by interviews, roundtables,

and testimonies. At the second level, publications synthesize the experiences of guerrillas and progressive movements in an organized manner. The third level is represented by more broad-ranging analytical and theoretical works.

In 1999, I published a book called *The Left in the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Making Possible the Impossible*. It is a synthesis. The first part explores what has happened to the Left in Latin America since the Cuban Revolution until today. The second part is concerned with globalization and the situation of the world. The third part asks: What happened to the Left? The ideas in the last section are extracted from my interviews regarding the practices of the Left in Latin America.

The part of the book I love most deals with what political instruments the Left requires in order to fight capitalism in this changed world. What can we recover from the past? What must we do in a new way?

Today's social movements are very skeptical about parties and political instruments. Thus, my last book, *The Left After Seattle*, treats the problem of how to articulate the interests of Leftist parties and social movements. The rejection of neoliberalism is growing with each day, but if we do not articulate this malaise to a common program, change will be difficult. The problem is that militant actors are very divided.

This is why I appreciate the World Social Forum. It provides people opposed to neoliberal globalization a space to debate, while committing to collective change.

This underlines why interviews are so important to me. Direct knowledge about what protagonists think and do will provide lessons for the future. For those who are interested in learning about these protagonists, they do not have to read my indirect analysis but can read the reflections of the protagonists directly.

People can draw their own conclusions by reading these interviews. Reality shows you that it is not the interpretations of academics that matter, but rather the practical application of knowledge. People reject manuals. People want to think for themselves and to come to their own conclusions. If the Right wants to erase the history of popular movements, they will be able to do so if we do not continuously

learn from our struggles. And if these struggles are erased, any possibility of changing the world will be greatly weakened.

### Discussion (responses to questions)

The current anti-war movement [in opposition to the impending US war on Iraq] is very interesting. All the more so considering that, in contrast to the movement against the war in Vietnam, this movement has formed and been active before a war begins. This has been a very important project for uniting and mobilizing - particularly in the North; organization has generally been easier in Latin America because we have had other problems that united us politically. So I think it is an important movement, although I don't know if we will be able to stop the drive to war.

The Left is in a very difficult situation internationally. It confronts a very conservative coalition of forces. Neoliberal globalization has imposed its framework and the Left has not yet constructed an alternative program. We are in the process of doing so, but the Left is in a very different situation than it was during the Cuban Revolution or Allende's process in Chile, for example, when the socialist camp existed to help and protect other countries seeking an alternative path.

At this moment in Latin America, the anti-neoliberal electoral victories of Chávez, Gutierrez [in Ecuador] and Lula [in Brazil] seek first and foremost to stop neoliberalism. However, I think it is impossible for any individual country to resist neoliberalism in isolation at this moment. When Chávez came to power, he knew that if he wanted to transform Venezuela he had to construct an international coalition of forces to help him. So he began to work with international organizations - the G77, members of the Andean Pact and Mercosur - to create an alternative to the proposed FTAA [Free Trade Agreement of the Americas], calling this coalition the 'Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas.'

He also knows that the rules of the game have to be changed to permit the transformation of the economy. The problem is that this is not a short journey. He changed the Venezuelan Constitution, towards making it possible to construct an alternative society. But this is only one aspect of the institutional situation. The

new constitution requires translation into concrete laws that will take what is on paper and make it happen in reality. In December of 2001, he was able to begin this transformation and that precise moment the great reaction of the opposition began.

Until that point, it seemed as though the US and the Venezuelan oligarchy thought that Chávez was somebody that could be co-opted, as has happened to so many populist leaders in Latin America. But when he began to move beyond rhetoric and changed the constitution, this was taken as proof of his loyalty to the promised progressive program. At this point, even some of his colleagues in struggle began to distance themselves from him.

Chávez began the process of transforming the Venezuelan economy and society in isolation. Now, however, the situation in Latin America has changed with the election of Lula [in Brazil] and Lucio [Gutierrez in Ecuador].

I think that the most important thing happening now is not the small economic transformations, but the creation of the subjects of an alternative society. The people of Venezuela were very depoliticized; but now Chávez has appealed to the people to participate in the solution of the country's problems. The majority of the poor spontaneously defended Chávez on April 11 last year [2001] and succeeded. The hungry have come to defend the government. The attempted *coup d'état* was very significant for Chávez, because the poor people knew they were the reason he was returned to power. From April 11 onwards, the common people - those who went to the streets to support Chávez - have felt empowered. The people have organized to protect their needs.

Thus, I am optimistic about the future of Chávez in Venezuela. He is a leader who knows that the revolution cannot go ahead if the people are not organized and empowered.

The international context has changed significantly since Chávez's election in 1999. Lula's triumph in Brazil and Lucio's triumph in Ecuador, and the increasing movement for change in Bolivia - these developments are revealing the return of a broad popular commitment to struggle for an alternative. Unlike Chávez, Lula has come to power with some elite support that is interested in stopping neoliberal-

ism. However, the business elite in Venezuela has always been outward-looking and lacking in national vision. Despite this, Chávez has not attacked his opposition by breaking the law. Chávez wants democracy. He opened a dialogue for people to discuss the process of change he is pursuing. It was the opposition who denied this democratic opening.

There is a need for international solidarity in support of Venezuelans. Not necessarily to support Chávez himself, but to support democracy and legality. If people want Chávez out, they should seek this by legal methods.

For Lucio in Ecuador, the situation is more complex than in Venezuela or Brazil. He inherits a country that is dollarized and he has much less popular support than either Lula or Chávez. The economy in Ecuador is also weaker than in these other two countries. Thus, his political future depends largely upon the future of Brazil and Venezuela.

In general, the radical left in the Americas is limited. We must first concentrate our efforts on eliminating hunger and unemployment, and on producing a situation where a revolution is possible. Lula is right in prioritizing his mandate to fight hunger in his country. For me, this is the first step of a revolution.

What alternative is being created? We already have some experiences at the local level and with social movements that can help us in the future. It is essential to systemize the lessons of these experiences.

We are not empty handed: we have experiences from which to draw. The problem is that we don't know - we have not studied - these histories. We must study them in order to recover the ideas with which to build an alternative. Meanwhile, Marxist academics must conduct a profound critique of contemporary capitalism, using Marxist concepts while creating new ones to fit our changing reality. We must analyze the contradictions of this world in order to construct another.



### **About the speaker:**

Marta Harnecker, originally from Chile, has long been active in the forefront of progressive social change in Latin America. Marta studied with Ricoeur and Althusser in Paris from 1963-68. She translated Althusser's "For Marx" into Spanish. Back in Chile, she was very active in the Popular Unity Government of Allende but fled to Cuba when Pinochet came to power. She has resided in Havana ever since and is now Director of The Latin American Popular Memory Research Center (MEPLA) in Havana.

### **Other CERLAC publications on related topics:**

"Why Canada Should Support Chávez"  
by Maria Paez Victor.  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-1\\_Victor.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-1_Victor.pdf)

"Colombia in Conflict, Venezuela in Crisis," report by Diego Filmus.  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-6\\_Colombia\\_Venezuela.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-6_Colombia_Venezuela.pdf)

"Reflections on the World Social Forum"  
by Katheryn Palmateer and Carlos Torres.  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-7\\_WSF.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-7_WSF.pdf)

"The PT in Power: Prospects for Change in Brazil," report by Christina Polzot.  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-4\\_PT-Brazil.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-4_PT-Brazil.pdf)

### **Background information on-line:**

Rebelión - La página de Marta Harnecker  
<http://www.rebelion.org/harnecker.htm>

Judy Rebick Interviews Marta Harnecker  
<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=45&ItemID=2314>

The Military and the Revolution: Harnecker interviews Hugo Chávez (January 09, 2003)  
<http://zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=45&ItemID=2841>

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